



**Phoenix Herpetological Sanctuary**  
20701 N. Scottsdale Road, Suite 107—PMB 401  
Scottsdale, AZ 85255 • 480-513-HERP

# **BALL PYTHON**

*(Python reglus)*

The ball python is quite simply the most popular pet python in the world. Ball pythons are generally a bit shy, but they make for ideal captives, because they are of a small size, are generally friendly, are easy to care for, and come in a remarkable array of colors and patterns.

Ball pythons are native to central and western Africa and thrive in these warm, tropical areas. They are known as the royal python in many parts of the world and are revered in some areas of Africa.

Ball pythons make for a quality pet for the first-time keeper and experienced herpetoculturists alike.

### **Ball Python Size**

Ball python hatchlings are approximately 10 inches in length. Adult female ball pythons average 3 to 5 feet long, and adult male ball pythons average 2 to 3 feet in size. This is a species in which mature females are typically much larger than the males. A 5-foot ball python is considered big, although lengths of 6 feet or more have been reported.

### **Ball Python Life Span**

With proper care, ball pythons can live 30 years or more. The record age for a ball python is more than 40 years – so plan on a long life for your new pet snake.

### **Ball Python Caging**

Ball python enclosures can be as simple or as elaborate as you want to care for. Remember that the more you put in the cage, the more you have to clean and disinfect on a regular basis. That said, there are different enclosures that work well for ball pythons, including, but not limited to, plastic sweaterboxes (i.e. Rubbermaid), melamine racks and any of the commercially available, plastic-type reptile cages. Glass aquariums and tanks are adequate for ball pythons, but the screen tops on such enclosures can make it very difficult to maintain proper humidity levels.

Juvenile ball pythons seem to do well in small enclosures that make them feel secure. A small snake in a big cage can become overwhelmed and stressed. Adult ball pythons do not require exceptionally large or elaborate enclosures either. A 36-inch by 18-inch by 12-inch enclosure will more than comfortably house an adult ball python.

Spot-clean your ball python's enclosure as necessary. Remove feces and urates as soon as possible. Do a complete tear-down every 30 days by removing all substrate and cage accessories and completely disinfecting with a 5 percent bleach solution. Rinse the enclosure thoroughly with water, and allow it to dry completely before replacing cage accessories and your snake. Do not use glass cleaner to remove water spots! A simple wipe down with a soft paper towel or cloth is safest and chemical free.

The one cage accessory that is required for a happy ball python is a good hide box. . . maybe even a couple of them. Ball pythons are secretive snakes that appreciate and utilize hide spots. Provide one on each end of your

python's enclosure so that it doesn't have to choose between temperature and security. Clay flowerpots, plastic flowerpot trays and commercially available hide boxes all work well.

### **Ball Python Lighting and Temperature**

Remember that enclosures must allow for a proper thermal gradient that the ball python can utilize, with a hotspot on one end of the enclosure and a cool spot on the other. Provide your ball python with a basking spot temperature of 88 to 96 degrees Fahrenheit and an ambient temperature of 78 to 80 degrees. The ambient temperature should not fall below 75 degrees. It is vitally important to know the temperatures at which you are keeping your snake(s). Do not guess! A great way to monitor temperatures is to use a digital indoor/outdoor thermometer with a probe. Stick the thermometer to the inside of the cage on the cool end and place the probe on the warm end, and you'll have both sides covered at once.

There are several ways to go about heating a ball python enclosure. Undercage heating pads and tapes, ceramic heat emitters, are just a few. It is crucial to keep an eye on the humidity within the enclosure, especially if combined with a screen top, as both will dry the air quickly. Use thermostats, rheostats and/or timers to control your heat source. Do not use hot rocks with snakes as they can heat unevenly over too small of a surface area and can cause serious burns.

Supplemental lighting is not necessary for ball pythons! Retail pet store employees will tell you otherwise, but it is not necessary. In fact, overhead lighting is stressful to snakes especially a nocturnal species like the ball python.

Ball pythons seem to prefer humidity levels of 50 to 60 percent. Maintaining proper humidity will allow your ball python to shed properly.

### **Ball Python Substrate**

Newspapers and paper towels are the cheapest and easiest substrates for ball pythons with regards to cleaning and disinfecting – out with the old, in with the new. Cypress mulch and orchid bark are great substrates for controlling humidity, but remember that too much humidity can be as detrimental (if not more) as too little. Never use any substrate containing cedar, as it contains oils that can be deadly to reptiles! Avoid sand, shavings and peat bedding.

### **Ball Python Food**

Feed your ball python an appropriately sized rodent weekly. "Appropriately sized" means prey items that are no bigger in circumference than the ball python at its largest circumference. Ball pythons can eat rats from the time they are young – starting off with rat pups or "crawlers" at first and moving up in size as they grow. Do not handle your ball python for at least a day after feeding, as this can lead to regurgitation. PHS only recommends frozen/thawed rodents, as we never feed live.

Ball pythons are well-known for not eating at certain times throughout the year, particularly in the winter months. Be prepared for the possibility of your ball python going off feed, and keep an observant eye on the snake's overall condition and body weight. This is typically nothing to worry about with healthy, well-established pythons, although it can be extremely frustrating to the snake-keeper. If your ball python is healthy, continue your husbandry routine as usual, but keep the amount of handling to a minimum. Offer your ball python food every 10 to 14 days until it is interested in eating again, as the snake will eventually resume feeding normally.

Feed adult ball pythons every 1 to 2 weeks and younger ball pythons weekly as they need this energy to grow. Do not be alarmed if a well-started ball python goes off feed during the cooler, drier times of the year, as this is common in captivity. Snakes generally do not eat while they are in the shed cycle.

### **Ball Python Water**

Always have fresh, clean water available for your ball python. Check the water daily. The size of the water dish is up to you. If it is large enough for the ball python to crawl in to and soak, sooner or later your snake will make the most of the opportunity – ball pythons seem to enjoy a nice soak from time to time. Ensure that the water bowl is not too deep for juvenile animals – 1 inch or so will suffice. Snakes of many species will defecate in their water bowls from time to time, so be prepared to clean and disinfect the water bowl. The water bowl should be cleaned and disinfected on a weekly basis. Having a spare water bowl for such occasions can be handy, so that one may be used while the other is being cleaned.

### **Ball Python Handling and Temperament**

Ball pythons are generally shy and will spend much of their time hiding. Your ball python may initially see you as a threat and it must learn who you are. The goal is to establish trust between you and your snake.

Always support your ball python's body and avoid fast movements. Once a ball python realizes that you will not hurt it they often seem to enjoy being handled. Some ball pythons may try to hide when handled and occasionally there are ones that may even bite due to excessive fear. These ball pythons may require a bit more time to settle in and establish trust. A ball python's bite is a superficial wound. If a snake looks like it is going to strike, it is best to not handle it. Relax when holding your animal – sit down and give the animal a chance to settle.

Some snakes may not eat for several hours or longer after being handled, so avoid handling if you plan to feed. After a snake has eaten it may be a good idea to limit the handling because it may be uncomfortable for the animal. Avoid putting your snake's cage in a heavy traffic area, excessive movement, and other pets should be avoided.

### **Observation Journal**

Professional breeders and biologists always keep a record of each animal. PHS does the same for the over 1700 animals currently housed at the facility. While this is a very time-consuming task, it is vital for the life and health of each animal. We teach PHS Summer Camp students how to accurately record and keep a journal and how it benefits both the owner and animal.

Below is an example of an Observation Journal for a ball python:

Male: Noah

Card #1

Ball Python, Spider  
*Python Regius*

Born: mid 2009  
Arrived: 2009

Date	Action	Weight	Notes
1-22-10	shed		Finally complete
1-23-10	mouse		
1-29-10	Fed mouse; bit; didn't eat		Neosporin and damp paper towels, healed nicely
1-30-10	f/t mouse		
2-4-10	mouse		
2-6-10		175g	
2-7-10	mouse		
8-8-10		200g	
2-10-10	mouse		
2-14-10	mouse		
2-19-10	mouse		
2-24-10	mouse		
3-2-10	mouse		
3-5-10	shed		complete
3-13-10	mouse		
3-18-10	mouse	241g	Bit <i>again</i> , Neosporin, doesn't look too bad
3-22-10	mouse		Healing very nicely

Keeping an accurate record of feedings, shedding, and regular activities is important. It will be easy to notice a change in behavior which indicates possible illness or problems if you have records to review. A simple spiral notebook kept next to the enclosure is all that is needed.